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AUTHOR Marshall, James D.
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ABSTRACT

To examine how the school environment shapes the composing process, a series of interviews were conducted over 16 months with a sample of students from an academically oriented high school. After an initial background interview, each student met biweekly with one member of the research staff and discussed the writing he or she had done since the last interview. The analysis of writing function distinguished among three general uses: imaginative writing, personal writing, and informational writing. Audience analysis distinguished among self, teacher as part of an instructional dialogue, teacher as examiner, and wider audience. Students' reports on their writing instruction revealed few available options when they wrote for school. They shaped their messages within a narrow range of purposes and within rather severe formal constraints. The students' sense of audience profoundly affected their attitudes, so that with most of their work done for the teacher as examiner, they were less likely to engage themselves fully in the task. In general the results suggest that the nature of the writing students are asked to produce, the instructions they are given, and the responses they receive have a dramatic impact on the written product. (HOD)

Schooling and the Composing Process

James D. Marshall
Stanford University
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Introduction

In the decade since Emig (1971) characterized composing research as "disheveled," the field has grown in both size and coherence. On the one hand, the focus of such research has been expanded from high school writers (Emig, 1971; Mischel, 1974; Stallard, 1974; Matsuhashi, 1979) to include elementary students (Graves, 1975; Sawkins, 1975), college students (Pianko, 1979), remedial students (Perl, 1979), and adults (Flower and Hayes, 1980). On the other hand, the tools available to researchers have grown in number and sophistication, increasing the precision with which writers at work may be described. Yet in spite of the widening body of research, the picture of writers has remained remarkably consistent. Whatever their age or ability, writers usually must struggle with the conflicting constraints of generating ideas, translating those ideas into text, and editing that text into a coherent whole. Even Graves's (1975) elementary students "learned to make writing difficult" when the creation of a final product became important to them.

At the same time that writers' processes have drawn increasing research interest, a number of works on the teaching and learning of writing skills have suggested means of easing the process, arguing that all the constraints facing a writer need not be met at once. Elbow (1973), for example, dismisses the notion that "to form a good style, the primary rule and condition is not to express ourselves in language before we thoroughly know our meaning" and asserts instead that one should "think of

writing...not as a way to transmit a message, but as a way to grow and cook a message." Murray (1978) defines writing as a "process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it" and goes on to state that the "process can be described, understood, and therefore learned." Both of these authors perceive writing as a process that proceeds in stages--stages which should be kept separate if the cognitive systems employed in writing are not to become overloaded. Meaning must be discovered before it can be communicated, and writing can be used to accomplish both ends.

Yet to be thoroughly understood--or even properly studied--the composing process must be placed in its context. Different writing tasks and different writing environments may well encourage different sets of composing strategies. In the present report I will be examining how one writing environment--that found in schools--has helped shape the composing processes of one group of students.

Procedures

The data for this study derive from two sources. The first is a series of interviews conducted over 16 months with a sample of students from an academically oriented high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The students (20 during the first year with 15 continuing for both years of the study) were originally categorized by grade (9th and 11th), sex, and, success as a writer (more successful, less successful, English as a second language). After an extended background interview, each student met bi-weekly with one member of the research staff. During

these interviews, students were encouraged to discuss the writing they had done since the last interview and, more specifically, to discuss in detail at least one piece of extended writing. Researchers typically put questions to the students such as: how long did you work on this piece? what steps did you take in completing it? what gave you the most trouble? what instruction did you receive before beginning? what kind of response did you receive when it was finished? Each interview was tape-recorded for later analysis. In the end, that analysis was based on 294 separate discussions of individual papers or the writing process in general.

In addition to meeting with researchers, students were encouraged to save and bring to the interviews all of their writing of at least paragraph length. These pieces were photocopied and returned to the students. In all, researchers collected 603 pieces of writing, representing over 84 percent of the writing students reported completing for school and over 90 percent of students' self-sponsored writing.

When the data collection was completed, both the tape-recorded interviews and the collected student writing were analyzed. The interviews were coded using a 145-item inventory organized around 15 topics (the composing process, the instructional situation, knowledge base, problem areas, etc) discussed in the interviews. Student responses were coded as present or not to each item under each of the 15 topics. The mean percentage of response for each item was then calculated across students who had discussed the topic--this to insure that results were not biased toward those students who spoke or wrote

the most.

Finally, the collected student writing was coded for function and intended audience using Applebee's (1981, 1983) taxonomy. The analysis of writing function in the sample distinguished among three general uses of extended writing: 1) Imaginative writing, or writing within one of the several literary genres. 2) Personal writing, that is, writing that takes for granted a context of shared, personal concerns, exploring ideas rather than formally defining or arguing for them and 3). Informational writing, or writing whose purpose is to share information or opinions with another. Such writing may be subcategorized by levels of abstraction, moving from a direct report of events through summary, analysis. and theoretical argumentation.

The analysis of intended audience distinguished among 4 possible readers for student writing: 1) Self, that is, writing intended primarily for the students' own use. Examples might include class notes as well as personal journals or diaries 2) Teacher, as part of an instructional dialogue. Here, the writer assumes that the reader will support and advise rather than evaluate the effort. 3) Teacher as examiner, in which the writer assumes that the reader's response will involve an evaluation of the performance, and 4) Wider audience, in which the writer assumes that he or she has something of value to share in a context larger than the classroom.

Students' Reports on Their Writing Instruction

As reported in Applebee (1983), the largest percentage of the writing our case study students produced for school was informational in function, and most of that was limited to summarizing or analyzing information drawn from textbooks or teachers' presentations. This pattern held across both grade levels and ability groupings, although poorer writers' work showed more variation (78 percent informational versus 91 percent for better writers and 98 percent for ESL writers). Given the widespread use of such highly specific writing tasks, one might expect that students would be well-schooled in their use. Yet student reports on the writing instruction they received indicated the contrary: in many cases, instruction on how to produce a piece of writing assigned was limited--if it took place at all--to a description of the final form the piece was to take.

Student interviews were coded for descriptions of class discussion that took place as writing assignments were made. Table 1 presents the average results for 15 students in the 96 interviews in which such discussions were mentioned. Some 22 percent of the time students reported that discussions focussed on content that should be included; another 27 percent of the time discussions focussed on appropriate form. Audience and evaluation criteria were mentioned less often. Only 27 percent of the time did students report a teacher-sponsored pre-writing activity as part of their preparation for writing.

Individual students' responses to the lack of more specific

Table 1. Student Reports of Classroom Discussion

Topics Discussed	Mean Percent
Content	22.0
Form	27.2
Evaluation Criteria	10.4
Audience	0.9
References	3.7
Pre-writing Exercises	27.2

N= 15 students discussing 96 papers

instruction took a variety of forms. Bill, for example, an 11th grader classified as a better writer, reported that the instruction took place a long time ago; further efforts were unnecessary. "Everyone knows how to do it, so they don't have to tell you anything." On the other hand, Jan, a 9th grader classified as a poorer writer, was pleased to have received a mimeographed sheet from her English teacher entitled "The Instant Essay Success Formula." Basically, the "formula" outlined the dimensions of the five-paragraph essay: write a clearly stated thesis in the first paragraph (usually in the last sentence), prove that thesis in the body of the paper (usually three paragraphs long), and then provide a conclusion.

Other students discussed what they already knew about school writing, stressing always the form that writing was to take. Margery, for example, told us during her eleventh grade year that "Paragraphs should be at least three sentences long and there should be at least three paragraphs in an essay. Be sure to have a beginning, a middle, and an end." Emily, another 11th grader, was one of several students to mention "the funnel" when writing for English:

> The top of the funnel...you have to open it with a very broad statement. Then you have to narrow it down a little bit, generally mentioning at this point the author and the book. And then the third (sentence) is the thesis statement. Then you...there are the three paragraphs. Three paragraphs to back up what you said in the first paragraph. That's the straight part of the funnel. Then you start out with a fairly narrow thing and recap what you said. They never say exactly what they want in the summary. All of my English teachers have told me this. Five paragraph essays....

Each of these reports--especially the last--is striking in the specificity with which students can describe the form their writing is to take. The shape of the product--even to the precise number of sentences per paragraph and paragraphs per essay--has been made clear to them. What remains unclear, however, is the motivation for the form. Emily, for example, went on to describe her frustration with the conclusion of essays:

> Every teacher seems to want a recap of what I've just written...which I think is stupid...I don't think you need a summary. Unless I'm arguing for 50 pages, then I could see the need, but not for a little five paragraph essay. It's dumb, it's redundant, and it's really ridiculous. And a waste of time.

Emily knows what to produce, but she does not know why she is producing it. Moreover, she--like other students in the sample--did not report receiving instruction on <u>how</u> to produce it. Instead, she has been given an organizational model into which she must slot whatever information is required for the task. The unexplained constraints of the form are clearly causing her some frustration.

There was more evidence of instruction after students' writing had been completed--in the form of grades and comments--than there was before. Yet both student reports and the collected papers indicate that such instruction was specific to the paper in question and rather unspecific about how students could incorporate improvements into their next effort. Students' comments on teachers' responses are presented in table 2.

In general, students were rarely impressed by the helpfulness of their teachers' comments. They were more likely to

Table 2. Student Reports on Teacher Comments

Mean Percent of Papers

	Better Writers	Poorer Writers	ESL Students
Grading Helpful	14.4	23.7	15.6
Student Pleased with Evaluation	31.3	26.5	12.4
Papers discussed	38	25	33
Number of students	5	6	4

	English	Social Studies	ESL
Grading Helpful	21.8	9.1	12.7
Student Pleased with Evaluation	21.2	32.0	13.5
Papers discussed	56	22	11
Number of students	15	15	4

make such reports about their English papers than about papers from social science or ESL classes. Poorer writers, on the other hand, were more likely than better or ESL writers to make such reports. Not surprisingly, better writers more often reported being pleased with a teacher's evaluation, but not by a very large margin.

The relatively small number of students mentioning helpful teacher comments can perhaps be explained by examining a small sample of those comments. Larry, for example, classified as a poorer 9th grade writer, received a grade and the following on one of his English essays: "You have some good ideas, but you need to be more careful about your word choice and your sentence structure. Make your sentences grammatically correct and as precise in vocabulary as possible."

It is difficult to see how Larry, or any other student, could make use of such advice. First, he has not been told which of his ideas are good--or why they are good. The remark may simply be a buffer protecting Larry from the negative remarks which follow. Second, he has been told to make his sentences grammatically correct, yet unless Larry was trying to make his sentences incorrect, it is probably the case that he has not mastered some of the sentence forms attempted. Should he avoid them in the future? Third, he has been told to be "precise" in his choice of vocabulary, but the suggestion is itself imprecise in indicating which words need clarification. The production of proper and varied sentences containing an intelligent choice of words is task at which even the best writers sometimes fail.

Telling Larry to do something without showing him how to do it seems unhelpful at best.

When teachers' comments were more specific, they were sometimes insensitive to the writing in question. Emily, for example, received a grade and the following pieces of advice in response to a story she had written for an eleventh grade English class:

> 1) "Avoid `so' as a conjunction." (Emily's sentence read, "The rain pelted down hard against the window that night so my companion Sherlock Holmes and I were surprised to hear a knocking at the door.")
>
> 2) "Avoid beginning a sentence with `but'." (Here, Emily's prose ran, "Without a word, he took off his overcoat and galoshes. But when he took off his hat, his beard went with it, revealing light blond hair and a young slim face.")
>
> 3) "Use a more exact word (for `ass')." (Emily had written, as part of a dialogue, "And he's such a complete ass, always telling lies about people. He said that he had our father's blessing for the marriage, the bloody liar.")

In each of these cases, the teacher had applied a rule where the rule could be more properly finessed--especially in a short story where a wider latitude of expression can be assumed. Emily responded with "why not?" to each of the comments. She did not understand the reason for the rule cited, and more importantly, her own reading had given her a sense of what was right in the situation. In this case, her judgement was arguably more appropriate than her teacher's.

Finally, teachers' comments in the sample often moved beyond advice to an actual re-shaping of the students' sentences. Lynn, an ESL student, received the response illustrated in figure 1 to

a paper for her English class. The strategy employed here--modelling corrections for Lynn to follow--might have been helpful if Lynn had been given more guidance on how to follow the model. But that guidance was absent. The researcher working with Lynn reported that "The teacher turned back this paper with the first paragraph only corrected for grammar mistakes. She told Lynn that she didn't understand what Lynn was talking about and told her to fix the grammar throughout the paper." Again, instruction in how Lynn is to "fix" the grammar remains vague at best. She is clearly having trouble expressing herself in English, but it is difficult to see how the teacher has helped matters. In this case, Lynn visited an ESL tutor who helped her correct the mistakes, basically by re-writing the paper with her. Unless the principles behind the re-writing are made clear, however, Lynn's future work is likely to be just as problem-ridden as this was.

The post-hoc instruction that students received on their writing, then, sometimes seemed less than helpful. As the examples show, teachers' comments tended to focus on form--especially at the word and sentence level--without providing guidance as to how or why a more appropriate form was to be achieved.

Taken together with the limited functions their school writing was to serve, these responses suggest that our students had very few options available to them when they wrote for school. They shaped their messages within a narrow range of purposes and within rather severe formal constraints. When they moved outside of these constraints, they were corrected, but they

rarely reported receiving instruction about the processes they were to employ in writing. They were given a rather austere picture of what writing was to look like in finished form, but little direction as to what steps they might take to achieve it. The effect such instructional patterns can have on students' attitudes and writing processes will be discussed in the following sections.

Attitudes towards the Writing Task

What were students' attitudes toward the writing tasks they were assigned in school? Were these attitudes consistent across students or did some report a higher level of engagement than others? What factors affected students attitudes most clearly?

Students' discussions of particular papers were rated for the extent of their involvment in the writing task. Results are presented in table 3. Better writers were evenly divided in their attitude toward school writing, while ESL students were most likely to express a perfunctory attitude. Poorer writers, on the other hand, reported a higher level of involvement for some 82 percent of the papers they discussed. These results may be partially explained by reference to the wider variety of purposes for which poorer students wrote.

One of the factors strongly affecting our students' attitudes toward school writing may have been the audience for whom they were writing. As reported in Applebee (1983), some 66 percent of our students' writing was addressed to the teacher as examiner. While there was some variation across subjects and achievement levels--with poorer writers again showing more

Table 3. Student Reports of Attitudes Toward Specific Writing Tasks

	Mean Percent			
	Perfunctory	Involved	Papers	Students
Better Writers	52.1	47.8	35	5
Poorer Writers	17.7	82.3	25	6
ESL Students	76.1	23.8	10	4

latitude--our students' sense that they were to be judged for the quality of their written products informed may of their reports.

One can hypothesize that the effect of a judgmental audience for student writing would be to displace student interest in the task itself with an interest in the teacher's response to the finished product. Individual reports from students appear to bear this out. Bill, a 9th grader classified as a better writer, explained that, for him, writing is a "mundane" activity whose major purpose is to teach "discipline." He asserted that to get a good grade on an assignment, one must use "nice sounding words" and "nice sentences" and that one should use "concise, descriptive words, but not run on and on. You must relate to the thesis." Donna, an 11th grader also classified as a better writer, described her pleasure in getting a good grade on an assignment because "It was longer than one page, which was the minimum. And I put effort into it...nothing major, but a little bit. And it had a lot of information, which is what (the teacher) wanted."

In both of these examples, students appear to be distancing themselves from the writing task, focusing on surface details ("nice sounding words" and "nice sentences") and almost exclusively on teacher expectations ("...it had a lot of information, which is what [the teacher] wanted"). They reveal both the perfunctory attitude expressed by some of the better writers in the sample--and its cause. When students had to shape their message constantly to fit the expectations of an examining audience, then whatever interest they had in the message eventually gave way to the details of its presentation.

The somewhat cynical attitudes expressed by better writers when writing for the teacher as examiner had their counterpart among the poorer writers when they were asked to undertake similar tasks. Terri, a 9th grader, pointed out that "The things I read are more like journal writing...you know, honest. (When you write for school) you want to make it sound good to get a good grade, but you don't really mean it."

Some of the poorer writers' attitudes were shaped by failure. The 11th grader, Emily:

> I don't think much of my essays. I don't like them...I don't like essays really. I just think they're kind of a waste of time....Not really that. I'm really not good at them is what it really is. I don't think that logically or something. My logic is not that logic.

Whereas Donna can meet her teacher's specifications--delivering "more than a page" with "a lot of information"--Emily cannot. It is difficult to see how her sense of failure will enhance her skills as a writer.

The students' sense of audience, then, had a profound effect on the attitudes they brought to the writing task. Still another factor influencing those attitudes was the pressure they felt to complete the task on time. As reported in Applebee (1983), students indicated that the majority of their writing assignments had to be completed within one day--frequently within one class period. To examine the relationships between time constraints and student attitudes toward writing, students' reports of liking or disliking assignments were compared with the amount of time given to complete the assignments. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4. Relationship between Writing Time and Attitude Toward the Writing

	Mean Percent Liking the Task			
Time to Write:	Class	One Day	More than Day	Week or More
	63.9	7.2	40.9	58.9
Number of papers discussed	12	24	9	25

N = 15 students

As table 4 shows, students most often reported liking two kinds of assignments: those completed during a class period (and thus often less sophisticated), and those for which they were given more than a day to work. Nearly 60 percent of the time, students reported liking assignments on which they had extended time to write. On the other hand, the least favored assignments were those that had to be completed within a day, usually for homework. Here, assignments may have required some thought, but students were not given adequate time for thinking.

When one considers the tight constraints of form, purpose, and audience that were already operating upon students as they wrote, it is not surprising that the added constraint of time affected their attitude toward the task. Consider the in-class essay illustrated in figure 2, which Sherri wrote for her advanced placement history class. In the time allotted (20 minutes) she was able to write only the two and one-half paragraphs reproduced in figure 2. Her teacher's comment was that "You should have gotten more written given the preparation time and in-class time. It is imperative for you to speed up!"

Sherri, however, was clearly responding to training about the form her writing was to take. In the first, crossed-out effort, she attempted to open with a broad statement (the opening of "the funnel" discussed earlier), then realized that there would not be time to go anywhere with it, and thus, in the second draft of the first paragraph, collapsed the first two sentences into one. Even in the second effort, she stopped to correct lexical infelicities. Sherri was extremely disappointed in her

performance, but given the constraints under which she was operating, it is surprising that she was able to produce even what she did.

The attitudes of our students toward their school writing, then, appeared to be shaped by particular features of that writing. The fact that most of their work was done for the teacher as examiner meant that they were less likely to engage themselves fully in the task--to commit themselves to a message and a form that was uniquely theirs. Rather, students kept their distance, designing the written product so as to meet the somewhat strict specifications of their audience. Further, they met those specifications within tightly constrained time limits, often having to submit a final version of their work at the sound of a bell. The effect of these constraints was to remove students even further from a sense of personal control over the task at hand. With the rules set so rigidly, there was little student ownership of the product they created--and thus little commitment to it. The cumulative impact of the constraints placed on these students is shown most clearly in the processes they employed while writing. Those processes will be discussed in the following section.

The Writing Process

In producing a piece of writing for school, students go through several steps, both prior to and during the act of writing itself. These steps fall into three general categories: generating information, organizing, and drafting. In the first, generating information, students go through a period of

incubation--however brief--in which they consider the dimensions of the task and the strategies they will use for completing it. They may read or re-read texts containing the information they need, consider a thesis around which they can marshal their arguments, and search for specific facts or selected quotations that may help them prove that thesis. In the second, organizing, students begin to use writing as a tool for shaping their message, writing and re-reading notes, drafting an exploratory piece in which they attempt to explain the task and its demands to themselves, or constructing an outline, in whatever form, to stake out the order of their presentation. In the third, drafting, students may begin the act of producing text, writing one or more rough drafts until the piece takes the form students want it to have. Neither the three categories nor the steps within them represent orderly or sequential stages in the writing process. Rather, the categories represent a template which can be laid over the complex process of composing, allowing us to see more clearly what steps are most often taken as students write.

Interviews were coded for students' reports of these aspects of the writing process. From the results in table 5, we can see the extent to which writing in different subjects encouraged the use of these steps. For example, an average of 64 percent of our students' reports on social science papers mentioned reading as part of the writing process, compared with about 36 percent of the reports on English papers. On the other hand, papers in English classes were more likely to involve thinking and organizing around a thesis than were those from social science classes. Like students in social science classes, students in ESL

Table 5. Writing Processes Reported on Papers for Selected Subject Areas

Processes	Mean Percent of Papers			
	English	Social Studies	ESL	Out of School
Incubate	35.7	21.6	0.0	24.5
Read	35.6	63.6	46.8	19.8
Re-read	9.0	18.1	14.2	21.7
Thesis	37.5	9.5	20.2	13.8
Quote	19.3	14.8	0.0	0.0
Notes	9.9	31.1	60.1	6.8
Outline	28.3	28.9	27.0	19.5
Exploratory Writing	25.1	33.1	0.0	42.9
Rough Draft	44.5	40.2	53.2	33.1
Multi-draft	17.2	9.9	13.8	50.5
Papers discussed	129	40	21	16

N = 15 students

classes tended to report relatively often on reading and note-taking as part of their writing process, while they did not report as often on organizing around a thesis, and never reported on thinking through the task before writing.

Reports on out-of-school writing, while few, showed a different pattern of results. Here, students seldom read or took notes as part of the writing process. Instead, they reported engaging in exploratory writing more often than did students reporting on school tasks, and were much more likely to go through several drafts of a piece.

In general, better writers took more steps while writing than did poorer writers (table 6). Some 50 percent of the time, for example, better writers reported that they used reading as part of the writing process, while poorer writers made these reports only 38 percent of the time. Likewise, better writers reported taking notes, searching for quotations, and organizing around a thesis more often than did poorer writers. On only one step--outlining--did poorer writers report more frequently than better.

Results from the ESL students showed a somewhat surprising pattern. While reporting least frequently on incubation, exploratory writing, re-reading notes, and multiple-drafting--a function, perhaps, of the the limited time in which they had to work--they reported more frequently than the native-speaking poorer writers on taking notes, outlining, and producing a rough draft. On certain specific steps, in other words, the pattern for ESL students more closely resembled the pattern for better writers than it did the pattern for poorer writers.

Table 6. Relationships between Writing Process and Writing Ability

Processes	Mean Percent of Papers: Better Writers	Poorer Writers	ESL Students
Incubate	36.7	35.3	20.1
Read	49.8	38.5	41.7
Re-read	16.9	13.3	2.7
Thesis	37.7	22.5	24.2
Quote	25.3	6.5	12.1
Notes	23.5	11.4	28.2
Outline	20.3	26.9	43.6
Exploratory Writing	38.1	30.2	11.0
Rough Draft	37.3	36.4	55.6
Multi-draft	29.2	12.8	7.3
Papers discussed	79	82	69

N = 15 students

These trends may be explained in one of two ways. First, it may be that one of the characteristics of the better student writers was that they had learned to take specific steps in producing an assignment for school--to go through a recognizable series of stages, in whatever sequence, that supported the writing process and eased its constraints. The poorer writers, in contrast, may not have learned to take these steps--or may not often take them--and have become classified as "poorer" partly because the process is thus rendered so difficult. The ESL students, on the other hand, may have been receiving a substantial amount of teacher guidance and support during the writing process. It seems likely that assignments for such students would be structured more rigidly, perhaps proceeding in teacher-designated steps, than were assignments for native speakers.

The second explanation derives from the nature of assignments given to students in the three ability groups. We have seen, for example, that our better writers and ESL writers were somewhat more likely than poorer writers to write for informational purposes, to operate from text-based knowledge, and to write for the teacher as examiner. Since poorer writers more frequently wrote for themselves or for the teacher within an instructional dialogue, it seems likely that the writing they produced for school sometimes served a different, perhaps more personal function than the writing done by other students. Their reports on process perhaps reflect that fact.

Yet, to draw the argument even tighter, poorer writers may

have been assigned different tasks precisely because they had trouble with the assignments given better students. At the same time, they could not conveniently be given the instructional support provided to the relatively smaller number of ESL students in the school. Thus, for them, the rules of school writing were shifted slightly. As poorer writers, they were not as frequently assigned the types of tasks given to better writers (who could handle them on their own) or to ESL students (for whom some intensive help was available). Yet when poorer writers were given such tasks, which still represented the majority of their efforts in school, they appeared to lack the process supports other students in the sample possessed.

The problems students faced when they wrote reflected both the abilities they brought to the task and the constraints placed upon them as they composed. As can be seen in table 7, ESL writers most often reported difficulty with grammatical forms, and to a lesser extent with generating ideas. Better students, on the other hand, reported little trouble with word and sentence level skills, instead indicating that their major problems were in generating ideas, organizing, and constructing a thesis--perhaps because they were also worried about having insufficient time. (Sherri's inability to write a satisfactory first paragraph in 20 minutes reveals how these problems can converge.) Finally, poorer writers also reported having trouble with time and with generating ideas, but additionally indicated difficulty understanding the assignments they were given. This may be

Table 7. Student Reports of Problems while Writing

Problem	Mean Percent of Papers		
	Better Writers	Poorer Writers	ESL Students
Organization	18.6	10.9	20.7
Grammar	4.1	2.2	62.4
Words	6.3	15.1	31.9
Time	29.2	25.9	7.1
Thesis	25.7	15.7	3.9
Understanding	10.3	19.7	5.0
Generating Ideas	32.5	22.6	25.3
Papers discussed	40	41	39
Number of students	5	6	4

related to the lack of pre-writing and during-writing support described earlier.

The relatively high proportion of writers reporting difficulty with generating ideas may be due to several factors. First, the somewhat narrow range of purposes available to students when they wrote for school meant that many of the ideas they might have had could not be included in their school writing. Second, the organizational form much of their writing had to take--with a thesis statement, elaboration, and conclusion--may itself have abetted students' inability to generate ideas.

Under the thesis/support model, the overall argument of the essay is to be laid out at the very beginning, showing the reader exactly where the writer will go. Realizing this, students frequently reported that the opening paragraph gave them the most trouble. Wayne, for example, a better 11th grade writer, stated that

> The beginning is the most important to me. If it's not right, it is almost impossible to get anything else. The thesis is in the first paragraph....I need a paragraph to prove each point made in the thesis. It kind of outlines everything for me.

Wayne perceived the first paragraph as a microcosm of the paper as a whole, and therefore had to "worry" it until it was just right. Yet in focusing so intensely on the first paragraph, Wayne not only determined the direction his essay was to take, he eliminated every other direction. Because the first paragraph of the thesis/support essay requires exactitude, because it <u>is</u> a microcosm, the paper as a whole is contained within it. Donna,

another better 11th grade writer, suggested that she relaxed a little once the thesis and the first paragraph containing it had been constructed:

> The beginning paragraph ends with the thesis sentence. That's just what I want my examples to show. Examples are the next three paragraphs. Each one of those examples has two or three more examples to show that that's true. Then the last paragraph is just a conclusion, restating the thesis.

The two uses of "just" in the above may illustrate Donna's attitude toward the process. The first seems synonymous with "exactly," the second with "merely." Once the first paragraph is completed, the rest of the effort becomes the more-or-less mechanical one of filling out a pre-established design. Conclusions, rather than exploring the implications of the thesis, are simply re-statements of it.

Because of the time constraints under which they operated, our students could not generate ideas through exploratory drafts--at least they did not frequently report doing so. Rather, they drafted in a top-down fashion, struggling over the first paragraph and moving with greater ease through the rest of the process. The problem with generating ideas might be alleviated were students given more time and much more guidance as to the purposes to which writing can be put. Unfortunately, neither of these were available in their school setting.

When students confronted problems--and had sufficient time--they sometimes sought help. Interviews were coded for student reports of writing conferences held with teachers, parents, and peers. Results by achievement level are presented in table 8.

The patterns here are rather clear. The better and poorer

Table 8. Student Reports of Conferences about their Writing

	Mean Percent of Papers		
	Better Writers	Poorer Writers	ESL Students
Discussed with:			
Teacher	6.6	19.3	60.7
Parent	65.6	47.4	0.0
Peer	63.3	50.7	26.2
Number of papers	30	31	14
Number of students	5	6	4

writers who reported on conferences indicated that they conferred least often with their teachers and most often with their parents and peers. ESL students, on the other hand, reported conferring with their teachers far more often than did writers at the other achievement levels, indicating the higher level of instructional support they received while writing in school. They also reported conferring less frequently with parents and peers.

Why did better and poorer writers fail to confer with their teachers? Time may well have been a factor. When student reports of conferences were compared with their reports of time given for assignments, results showed that when students were given one day or less to work, they reported consulting with teachers only 16 percent of the time, whereas when they were given more than a day, the likelihood of reporting such a conference increased to 31 percent.

Still another factor may have been the students' perception of the teacher as examiner. Since the teacher is the one who will judge their work, students may feel hesitant about sharing work in progress. Sherri explained that conferring with a teacher made her feel guilty:

> Then it becomes somehow not my own work and I feel guilty about it. The paper is how they would have written it. It would be their grade. You're using someone else's ideas.

While there may be a sense of compulsion to accept ideas from a teacher--and possibly alter one's own--suggestions from parents and peers can be accepted or rejected. Students can thus retain ownership of the grade they receive. Whatever the explanation, it appears that native-speaking writers in the sample did not

often look to their teacher when confronting problems in writing.

Conclusion

The results from the analyses reported in this chapter make it clear that discussions of composing processes must include not only descriptions of writers and their writing, but also descriptions of the environments in which they first learn and practice their skills. Emig (1971) suggests as much when she argues that "The first teachers of composition--by giving certain descriptions of the composing process and by evaluating the products of student writing by highly selective criteria--set rigid parameters to students' writing behaviors...that the students find difficult to make more supple." Britton et al. (1975) go further when they state, "It may well be that some of the assumptions about students' writing implicit in various teaching methods will be challenged when we know more about (the) psychological processes (in composing)" and that "a start can be made by shifting the focus...away from the product and on to the process."

Whether the current state of composing research is strong enough to challenge traditional teaching methods may not be clear, but what must come clear is the relationship between those methods and the composing processes of students. While students may come to school with some attitudes and practices already in place, these attitudes and practices are influenced greatly by the school environment. The nature of the writing students are asked to produce, the instructions they are given, and the response they receive must have dramatic impact, not only on the

written product, but on the writing process as well. To speak of composing processes without reference to the schooling which shapes them may be to isolate an effect from its cause.

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